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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001219

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR RS

SUBJECT: DANISH CARICATURE CONTROVERSY PRODUCES FALLOUT IN CHECHNYA

Classified By: A/Polcouns Bruce Donahue. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d).

**¶1. (C) SUMMARY:** On February 6, Chechnya's controversial Acting Prime Minister, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that Danish NGOs would be banned in his republic because of the insult to Muslims caused by the caricatures in a Danish newspaper. GOR officials distanced themselves from Kadyrov's position, while Danish officials said closure of the Danish Refugee Council, apparently the only NGO affected so far, resulted from concerns for the safety of its staff rather than from Kadyrov's announcement. An attack on a Danish citizen in Moscow appears unrelated to the controversy. Kadyrov's political strength has been growing in recent months, and his announcement appears to be part of his bid to become the republic's president. END SUMMARY.

• KADYROV STATEMENT LEADS TO SUSPENSION OF DRC ACTIVITY

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**¶2. (SBU)** In a February 6 statement, the Chechen Republic's Acting PM, Ramzan Kadyrov, accused Danes of insulting Muslims through the publication of the controversial caricatures in a Danish newspaper. Asserting that everything from Denmark would be banned in (predominantly Muslim) Chechnya, Kadyrov singled out NGOs.

**¶3. (SBU)** A Danish emboff told us February 7 that the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) appeared to be the only casualty of Kadyrov's announcement to date. The DRC is one of the largest providers of humanitarian aid in the North Caucasus, reportedly providing food to some 250,000 people in the region, primarily in Chechnya. The UN Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) told us that it had received a letter from the Chechen government advising that the DRC should suspend its activities because the government could not guarantee the safety of the NGO's staff.

DRC Country Director Per Ilsaas told us that though he had not received a copy of that letter, he was aware of it and his organization had suspended its field operations and stopped sending expatriates into Chechnya. DRC was also considering bringing its eight or nine expats working in the region to Moscow. (Note: The DRC also has approximately 340 local staff members. End Note.) Ilsaas said the suspension of DRC activity would not immediately create a life-threatening situation for its aid recipients. The DRC publicly underscored that the organization had no control over the Danish press and that it did not associate itself with any statements that might offend religious feelings.

• GOR OFFICIALS DISTANCE SELVES FROM KADYROV STATEMENT

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**¶4. (SBU)** Russian officials were quick to disassociate themselves from Kadyrov's statement. State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov said on February 7 that Kadyrov's words should be seen as "private views" rather than those of the Chechen

government. Mikhail Barshchevskiy, the GOR representative to the Constitutional, Supreme and Higher Arbitration Courts, questioned the constitutionality of Kadyrov's statement. Privately, a Chechen contact in the Presidential Administration in Moscow acknowledged to us that there was no relationship between the NGO and Danish newspapers, but he did not comment further on the issue.

• DANES TAKE LOW-KEY APPROACH

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¶ 15. (C) The Danish emboff told us February 8 that his government hoped the suspension would be short-lived. His embassy had chosen not to comment publicly in order to avoid sparking further controversy. It also was not seeking clarification from federal officials as to whether Kadyrov had the authority to ban the NGO, since this might lead to unpleasant questions as to how much control the Russian government was able to exercise in Chechnya. In the view of our Danish contact, Kadyrov had made his announcement as a tactical move to satisfy internal political constituents.

• MOSCOW ATTACK APPEARS UNRELATED

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¶ 16. (SBU) The media reported February 6 that a Danish citizen had been hit by a pellet from an air pistol fired by a Caucasian man in a brawl in central Moscow in which an Amcit had also been involved. While the incident was not initially related to anti-Danish sentiment, later reports suggested the shooting had been sparked by ill feelings over the Danish caricature. Our Danish embassy colleague told us February 8 that there was no indication of any such connection.

• COMMENT

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¶ 17. (C) The Danish caricature controversy sparked ill feelings among Russia's sizable Muslim population, and Ramzan Kadyrov's statement sought to exploit those feelings. Kadyrov's political strength has been on the rise, and he is widely seen as likely to become Chechnya's president when he turns thirty, the constitutionally mandated minimum age for assuming that position. Although his statement may be dismissed as that of a "loose cannon," as has long been his reputation, it may also have been calculated to reinforce the message that he is already in charge of his republic and not prepared to be outflanked in Muslim zeal by his Islamist opposition.

BURNS